

H-France Salon
Volume 11, 2, #5

Beyond the New Anti-Semitism

Dorian Bell
University of California, Santa Cruz

The March 2018 stabbing and burning of 85-year-old French Holocaust survivor Mireille Knoll, just a year after 65-year-old Sarah Halimi's defenestration in the same Parisian neighborhood, showed that murderous anti-Semitism in France hasn't lost its power to shock. Rather more familiar is the way in which these attacks were received. That both murders were reportedly accompanied by cries of "Allahu Akbar" made them the latest *pièces à conviction* in an ongoing case against the "new anti-Semitism." Distinguished from the old anti-Semitism by its association with Muslim immigrants and their descendants, as well as by its anti-Zionist bent, the new anti-Semitism is increasingly understood to pick up where the old anti-Semitism once left off: with the murder of Jews as Jews. Alarmed observers paint a nation – the first to emancipate its Jews – under siege by postcolonial harbingers of obscurantism. Others recommend caution, reluctant to tar French Muslims with too broad a bush.

Less familiar, perhaps, is how Jews have long featured at the intersection between France's national self-fashioning and imperial history. Take the late nineteenth-century dawn of high empire. France's eastern "axis of otherness" (to borrow a term from Fredric Jameson) did not so much shift from a German national foe as converge with the alterity of imperial subjects in the south. One reason is that defeat by the Germans in 1870 coincided with the Crémieux decree's transformation of 30,000 indigenous Algerian Jews into French citizens. Now could French anti-Semites, busy crafting the modern narrative of global Jewish conspiracy, map continental anxieties about German-Jewish invasion onto colonial anxieties about demographic threats overseas.

The resulting figure of the colonially conspiring Jew, I've argued elsewhere, helped reconcile radical French nationalists to a project of empire they initially opposed (see my *Globalizing Race: Antisemitism and Empire in French and European Culture* [Northwestern University Press, 2018]). Put another way, anti-Semitism bridged the vexed gap between nation and empire – and not just on the xenophobic right, since the Dreyfus Affair's temporary defeat of anti-Semitism at home armed republicans with the good conscience necessary to overlook racist spoliations abroad.

But if anti-Semitism once sent radical and republican nationalists alike into the arms of imperial expansion, today it does something like the opposite. Those in France sounding the clarion call most loudly against the new anti-Semitism appear intent on grounding French identity in the nation's right to keep the postcolonial south *away*. Former and current Muslim migrants, after all,

are those most represented as anathema to the philosemitic republic that rose from the ashes of Dreyfus and Vichy.

The old axes of otherness, too, now converge in the other direction. As migrants from the south become the principle of alterity against which xenophobic French nationalism reacts, that nationalism reconstructs a perennial German enemy to the east.

Insofar as this updated French nationalism constitutes itself in part against the new anti-Semitism, the accompanying rebirth of nationalist rivalries wouldn't seem to reignite old French canards about German Jews. Then again, who knows? In its European populist guise, nationalist Islamophobia accompanies denunciations of supranational "elites" associated with the European Union. The slippage from EU technocrats to rich German capitalists to nefarious Jewish bankers becomes easy from there: witness only the Hungarian example, where Victor Orbán's populist formula has successfully yoked Islamophobic denunciations of migrants to a transparently anti-Semitic campaign against the Jewish billionaire George Soros.

How long before one of the western European democracies, like France, follows suit? How long before Islamophobia and the old anti-Semitism rise in tandem, as a system, to join the new anti-Semitism in testing the limits of the French republican model? Impossible as these questions are to answer, they imply a third axis of otherness critical to the mix: the one stretching west from France across the Atlantic. Defenders of French assimilationist republicanism have traditionally contrasted France's ostensible "colorblindness" with an American (and British) multiculturalism thought to entrench racial categories. But as today's French republican voices increasingly take Muslim extremism as the foil for a republic retreating into the safety of the nation, they contribute to a transatlantic nationalism organizing itself along Islamophobic lines. The more these voices link philosemitic French republicanism with Israeli national sovereignty as crucial bulwarks against anti-Semitism, the more they align themselves with a post-9/11 American neo-conservatism obsessed with a clash of civilizations supposedly playing out in Europe and the Middle East.

Trumpism and Brexit have accelerated the transformation of France's western axis of otherness into an axis of sameness. Donald Trump's frequent exploitation of the European migrant crisis to American xenophobic ends coincides with his attempts at replacing the old Atlantic alliance with a new transatlantic nationalism. Not that this supranational nationalism is monolithic. When in March 2018 Trumpist political operative Steve Bannon exhorted a French gathering of National Front supporters to wear the "racist" insult proudly, he was stoking old counter-revolutionary fires diametrically opposed in France – historically, at least! – to the Enlightenment values invoked by Dreyfusards past and present. Yet whether the French architects of transatlantic nationalism care deeply about Jews (like neo-Dreyfusard decriers of the new anti-Semitism) or only opportunistically so (like a newly-renamed National Rally still dogged by Holocaust denial), the transatlantic Islamophobia they *both* fuel doesn't bode well, I think, for Jews anywhere.

I have ventured one explanation why, which is that Islamophobia threatens to pair with the old anti-Semitism into a global dyad of hate tailor-made for populist rhetoric. But let me end with some thoughts about how Jews factor as well into a corresponding resistance, and how this

resistance re-maps the various axes of otherness onto each other. Consider Houria Bouteldja, Franco-Algerian spokesperson for the decolonial Indigènes de la République movement in France and author of the incendiary 2016 pamphlet *Les Blancs, les Juifs et nous: Vers une politique de l'amour révolutionnaire* (*Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*). When Bouteldja reads the north-south divide between France and its Muslims alongside a set of twentieth-century transatlantic theorists (Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon) and twenty-first-century theoretical constellations (whiteness studies, critiques of settler colonialism, etc.), she confronts transatlantic nationalisms – new and old – with the Black transatlantic radicalism that, since the Haitian Revolution, has at once contested and defined them.

The move is producing consternation in France. Bouteldja's claims about French Jews' constructed "whiteness," for instance, remain illegible to mainstream French commentators. Yet they echo established theoretical paradigms in the American academy for thinking through relationships among whiteness, Jewishness, and Blackness. They also point back to the primordial French republican moment when, in the throes of the Revolution, the nascent republic evaluated the relative merits of Jews and African slaves for emancipation. That moment seems ripe for revisiting against the backdrop of Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and anti-Black racism currently scrambling the coordinates of the postwar Atlantic order.

Bibliography:

Globalizing Race: Antisemitism and Empire in French and European Culture (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018).

Other References:

Bouteldja, Houria, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*, trans. Rachel Valinsky (New York: Semiotexte, 2017).

Bunzl, Matti, ed., *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007).

Goldstein, Eric, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Mbembe, Achille, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

Rothberg, Michael, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Traverso, Enzo, *The End of Jewish Modernity*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Pluto, 2016).

Dorian Bell
University of California, Santa Cruz

H-France Salon

ISSN 2150-4873

Copyright © 2019 by H-France, all rights reserved